

MICHIGAN DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

Results of Specialty Crop Block Grant Program 10-170

Regional Agri-Tourism Marketing Project

Request of \$57,520.98

By

West Michigan Tourist Association

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Regional Agri-Tourism Marketing Program

The West Michigan Tourist Association (WMTA) has operated as a non-profit tourism marketing organization since 1917 and is the oldest continuously operating regional association in the nation. The vision and mission of the West Michigan Tourist Association are:

<i>Vision:</i>	<i>To be recognized best in service, knowledge, marketing and fulfillment.</i>
<i>Mission:</i>	<i>To market and promote travel to West Michigan and to enhance the image and economic success of its members.</i>

WMTA promotes the West Michigan region from Northwest Indiana to the Straits of Mackinac encompassing the entire west half of the Lower Peninsula. As a regional marketing area, it made sense for WMTA to proceed with this endeavor representing all of the specialty crops of the farms through out this large area. Thus said, WMTA is reporting the results for the Specialty Crop Block Grant Program – Farm Bill for improving the competitiveness of the farms who grow these specialty crops and for improving the awareness of Michigan’s farms as a tourism entity.

With this grant, we undertook the following for our “Regional Agri-Tourism Marketing Program” in order to familiarize the public with the availability of the specialty crops:

- I. **Premier Sponsorship of the Agricultural Tourism section of the 2010 *West Michigan Carefree Travel Guide* featuring farms, markets, u-picks and wineries which grow/feature specialty crops.** (pages 35 – 44 of enclosed guide) WMTA produces 250,000 copies of this comprehensive four-season guide to traveling in West Michigan and has done so annually since 1917.

Premier Sponsorship included two full pages of editorial focusing on specialty crops at the beginning and the end of the Agricultural Tourism section of the guide, along with photos for support (<http://www.bluetoad.com/publication/?i=34451&p=37>). Also included are the banner ads below each farm market/winery grid page, an eight-page section. The banners below the grid listings visually enhance this section, drawing readers to it. These ads drive traffic to WMTA.org’s new agri-tourism section and interactive map (see below for website and interactive map information). The section is closed with the chart showing harvest times, followed by “Food and Spirits,” which also has an editorial banner on page 46 above the winery ad directing the public to the interactive map at www.wmta.org. This guide was produced in March of 2010 (see enclosed copy).

OUTCOME: Based upon 250,000 copies printed, if 5% of the readers visited a farm with specialty crops, this resulted in 12,500 visitors. The average purchase of \$10.00 then generates \$125,000 for the industry, at a cost of \$17,100. (Average purchase price of \$10 was provided by Robinette’s Apple Barn & Winery.)

Long-term outcome: The grant and added partners doubled the agri-tourism section of the travel guide from five pages to 10 ½ pages. This section continues to grow even though the grant has ended as our partners realize the value in the section of the guide. WMTA added over 35 farm members to its membership

during this time, the majority of which kept their membership active even after the grant expired, understanding their strong relationship with tourism.

- II. **Main navigation tab on the WMTA website to the new agricultural tourism section.** WMTA's website is currently the largest and most visited site regarding travel in West Michigan. A tab on the main navigation bar to the newly created agri-tourism section (<http://www.wmta.org/agri-tourism-579/>) takes visitors to interactive maps of each of the specialty crops, farms and winery trails within WMTA's covered area. (Farms do not need to be a member of WMTA to be listed in this section.) The giveaway portion in this section gathers contact information when visitors enter to win agricultural related prizes. We have given away a wine tasting getaway to Brys Estate in Traverse City and also a \$50 Lakeshore Harvest Country Gift Certificate. A copy of the tri-fold brochure and travel guide were sent to all 741 people who entered.
- III. **WMTA.org banner ad with click through to interactive agricultural trail map.** A rotating banner ad placed on all pages of the website served as a link to the agri-tourism section described above. The banner ad was online November 18, 2009 through January 1, 2011. The design of the banner reflected that of the billboard seen throughout the region.

OUTCOME: Banner enjoyed over 2.5 million impressions during the one-year period it was online at WMTA.org. If 1% of those who viewed the banner visited farms with specialty crops, 25,000 visitors to farms with specialty crops would result. The average purchase of \$10.00 of product would generate \$250,000 for the industry with a cost of \$10,088.91.

Long-term outcome: The section remains an integral part of the website and continues to grow. The trail map is always available to guide the traveler to where the specialty crop can be found in West Michigan.

- IV. **Display banner promoting agri-tourism industry at consumer travel shows.** WMTA participated in nine consumer shows throughout Michigan and the Midwest in 2010. An agri-tourism banner was displayed in addition to WMTA's current trade show banners promoting travel in West Michigan. This encouraged visits to agricultural members and the agri-tourism sections of the website and *West Michigan Carefree Travel Guide*. This banner was designed by Harbor House Publishers, Boyne City, MI. Show attendees also received a promotional give-a-way promoting Specialty Crops in Michigan, which was an apple shaped jar opener.

OUTCOME: In 2010, shows were attended by approximately 436,836. Of the 436,836 attendees, if 5% of those attendees visited a farm with specialty crops, this would result in 21,841 visitors. The average purchase of \$10.00 of product would generate \$218,410 for the industry with a cost of \$6,903.30. Shows began in January of 2010 and ran through October of 2010.

Long-term outcome:

The presence of these marketing pieces expanded the thinking of the traveling public that agriculture is tourism. The high visibility of this banner at the most popular travel shows in the Midwest helped to cement the connection between the two.

- V. **Four Color Tri-Fold Brochures.** A four-color brochure designed to showcase the specialty crops growing seasons was distributed at consumer travel shows (20,000), through WMTA's mail program (20,000), and through the Michigan farm markets (60,000). 100,000 brochures have been distributed.

OUTCOME: Of the 100,000 brochures distributed, if 5% of those recipients visit a farm with specialty crops, this would result in 5,000 visitors. The average purchase of \$10.00 would generate \$50,000 for the industry with a cost of \$4,153.77.

Long-term outcome: The brochures presented a calendar showing when the most popular crops would be in season, allowing the public to continually refer to this document to know when to expect to be able to pick/or buy these crops. These brochures were also very popular with the farms themselves who loved being able to distribute them to their customers, allowing a stronger relationship to foster.

- VI. **Agri-Tourism Special Announcements:** Once a month editorial features and photos were sent via e-mail to over 20,000 Travel Tips subscribers, highlighting which crops were in season, which plants were available, where to purchase, etc. These e-blasts were sent out monthly from March to November. They were then featured in the In Season section of the agri-tourism section.
(<http://www.wmta.org/in-season-588/> and enclosed samples)

OUTCOME: 20,000 e-mails sent each month for nine months result in 180,000 e-mails sent. If 5% visited a farm with specialty crops, this would result in 9,000 visitors. The average purchase of \$10.00 of products would generate \$90,000 for the industry with a cost of \$2,250.

Long-term outcome: These were not only educational but also lighthearted and used to draw interest to the different crops.

- VII. **Billboard Program.** Forty billboards located throughout Michigan round-out our marketing initiatives that drove traffic to the agri-tourism section of WMTA.org while familiarizing the public with this concept. Billboards were ordered within one week of grant acceptance and ran until December 31, 2010.

OUTCOME: According to the analytics provided from CBS Outdoors, 95,275,600 vehicles have viewed these billboards this year and if 0.5% of these viewers visited a farm with specialty crops this would result in 476,378 visitors. The average purchase of \$10.00 of products would generate \$4,763,780 for the industry with a cost of \$23,225.

Long-term outcome: Because of the relationships made, we are working on another billboard promotion for coming years for West Michigan. The billboards brought the fresh products to the forefront in the minds of the traveling public.

Project Summary:

Overall, this project generated nearly 550,000 visits to our Michigan farms featuring specialty crops, and based on the average sale of \$10.00 per visitor, generated \$5,497,190 in sales at a cost of \$63,720.98.

WMTA proposed this project based upon what we do best – marketing – and strived to use Michigan-based businesses for all of its projects whenever possible to keep tourism dollars spent by WMTA in the state that produced these dollars. WMTA addressed the following issues, problems and identified these interests:

ISSUE:

- A. To make public aware of agri-tourism
- B. Promotion of the agri-tourism product to:
 - 1. Agricultural Community
 - 2. Tourism Community
 - 3. Public
- C. Stimulation of buying agri-tourism products

PROBLEM:

- A. The need for cross promotion of tourism and agriculture
- B. Cross marketing from field to consumer
 - 1. Farm Markets
 - 2. U-Picks – direct to farm
- C. Understanding when products are available – seasonality

INTEREST

- A. Desire to shop locally
- B. Support of local economy
- C. Promotion of farm products as a tourism opportunity

Overall long-term outcomes:

Overall, the project has made relationships between unlikely partners, a dairy farm partnering with a full service resort as an example. We have seen a marked rise in calls coming into our office not only for the specialty crops, but for visits to farms. The traveler now sees farms as an attraction, a tourism entity, and a destination in West Michigan.

Contact person for each project

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Respectively submitted by:



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